

In the Basin of Fundy, 1948

GAIL TAYLOR

L'expérience de deux sœurs qui ont passé leur enfance à la Mispic Beach sur la baie de Fundy près de St John, au Nouveau Brunswick, nous est racontée ici par le biais de photos. Ce texte nous révèle non seulement ce que ces instantanés montrent mais aussi tout ce qui peut être évoqué en dehors du cadre de ce qui a été inclus. Les parents et les grands-parents sont omniprésents ainsi que le caractère inusité des grandes marées et de la géologie de la région sans oublier l'ombre de la Guerre Mondiale qui plane sur leur passé.

A small rectangle 3.5 by 2.5 inches, this photo 65 years old in black-and-white bleached out with age to the same pale yellow that topped the milk laid out by the mother, Rosa (who may have been the one to snap it), in her perpetual naiveté of hope: *Slurp it down, Johnnie Brown!* The black is now pale charcoal and there is a limed, olden, overcast air to the photo that belies what may be going on. When depiction is read so long after it was made, subjects are elusive and their interactions must be inferred from the tableaux by various strategies and vantages.

In the one given here, the photographer faces eastward onto a wedge of Mispic Beach toward industrial Saint John on the Bay of Fundy, where the busy dry dock was; and from the age of the baby, it's August 1948, so just three years after the Japanese surrender that finally ended the war. Imagine the smoking flues of the city beyond the fringe of rocks that look like prehistoric spiny extrusions, which in a way they are, being igneous or maybe metamorphic from eras gone by, and pretty much impervious to erosion.

Rearing up from a receding tide, a stack of mnemonic rocks that look, however, only like themselves—implacable

outcroppings of mute witness battered by millennia of ocean, these rocks are poised to achieve the same renown geologically as the massive tides already have. The direction has been chosen to focus on two sisters, the older girl of four or five, pressed now into the sand on all fours, flanked by the one who sees but probably is not seen—at least, by one of the children. Then there's the shadow, a negative head-and-shoulders portrait flourished at one side of the head looming into the children's space by what might be a Rosie the Riveter head scarf slipped sideways. The older girl Deirdre (called Dee-Dee by her father) wears not a swimsuit but a brief dress rucked up around the waist, a print weathered by being hung out most often in a briny fog, with puffed sleeves that Rosa would have ironed for practice, muttering *Devilish!* between her teeth. This was before the family moved out of the grandfather's house where his housekeeper Hattie asserted her authority through tutoring her prodigious household skills in which, it would seem, the young wartime wife was unschooled. You can tell Dee-Dee's dress is smocked from the way it bunches out from the eyelet-edged collar, but since her own mother is dead, it might have been smocked by Rosa's mother-in-law, who did not come to the beach. Dutch-cut with bangs, Dee-Dee's dark hair swings forward in humid blooming waves that impart to the photo a physical sensation of motion. In one hand, the blunt-tipped tin head of a shovel, its face born down with the weight of her small right hand into the everlasting sand.

The shovel is not in use because a tow-headed toddler is clambering onto her big sister's back, the shutter catching a rout by baby Violet of her sister's act of digging, performed with characteristic gravitas, abandoned on demand. Dee-

Dee would serve a long tenure as a rapt, captive big sister, grace in her very bones, a tenure the baby must fledge into herself within a few brief years when she will apprentice herself by example and slow degrees to such forbearance as she is shown. Now, Dee-Dee steadies herself by spreading her weight into the crawl position that she tactfully resumed when the baby preferred to crawl even after learning to walk, so they could discover things low-down that had it been known would surely have been forbidden to them, although banning does requires naming and the adults

fathomless history of evolution, plucked from a hungry privilege on land and no match for the working over of an amniotic sea that turned them to marine mammals.

Beyond the uneven white margin of the photo, dulce has been ritually laid out to crinkle-dry on a particular pocked, purple rock under the father Harry's auspice, whose job this invariably was. Performing one of hers, Rosa unwraps damp tea towels and crumpled wax paper to dole out the leftover sandwiches from their lunchtime picnic: peanut butter, bleeding tomatoes, and chunks of

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might have been hard put to describe just what the children would find, down there. Discovery as one kinetic unit of two, suborning beneath the surface of domestic life to ken what clings to its underside: no accident the father, by his own account, would hide his ménage underneath floorboards and draped delicate as lingerie over the hinges that hold up the table's leaves.

In the picture, the toddler scrambles with her face full of adoration and salt sun, one leg doubled over her sister's back while the one eye of Dee-Dee seen by the camera suggests that both are scrunched shut—whether to withstand the assault of the baby, or the sun, can't be told; but the clamberer has her eyes open and gazes at her sister like a little cat concentrated on holding the assembly of molecules together that make up her provider. Violet is wearing a dress, too, but with rompers underneath. The two are like one creature born of sea-light in the leagues of rock pummelled to crystal sand and edged by the agency of a living tide. No others appear on this beach only recently relinquished by the navy for the use of a gladdened and boisterous population, post-war: only the two-in-one sisterlings, and the shadow thrust into their ambit from behind, so it must be between five and six o'clock, the afternoon of mid-August 1948. The mother packs extra food so they can loiter while the sun pauses before its final career into the bowl of the sea.

A cornet of sunshine strews cumulus, sending hot cones of *trendresse* / to caress / the girls' flesh ... and hissing like seabirds or reptilian amphibians, the tide sprawls out in a lacework of foam, scooping up jewels to return to the deep. It must have been this way when mammals were seduced from land to water seven times throughout the

white iceberg lettuce—anything to keep them here a bit longer. Carried out to sea by the breeze, their sentences are pulled mercifully into morphemes that require nothing by way of response.

What it is, is an outing to Mispic Beach in the grandfather Arthur's car, purveyor of pleasure that he was and the one catered to by his daughter Rosa, who it was already known in the bones would rather stay in his house, with Hattie to help, and the three meals each day perfectly predictable, than go forth with her husband. Harry, after all, has been back from his wartime radar operations overseas for long enough to make and grow Violet, who is no longer an infant, so it's nearly to the point of being unseemly for the family to go on living in Rosa's father's house, although Arthur, who wears his widowhood hard, avers otherwise. Harry is off-frame but ubiquitous, aloft in the elemental sea, the uncontested enchanter and dancer of the household and handsomer by far than the grandfather, whose planed horse face hangs down from a sanguine brow topped up by lavish white hair. The old man's concession to recreation is a straw boater to shade the sweet, complacent face, and suspenders tautened over a striped shirt with meticulously rolled-up sleeves, ironed to perfection by Hattie, who would recognize in the baby girl a natural ironer, by golly, and teach her young how to steam out the devil wrinkles from tucks and corners. Arthur is excessively lean, though not as militarily erect as the younger men home from the war. *His* war has long since come and gone, in which he refused to gallop with drawn sabre down a field converted to training grounds for WWI soldiers. Why should he, a medic, hurtle down the field waving his drawn sword—on horseback, no less!

Nobody could ever make Arthur do what he set his mind not to, whereas his son-in-law, who defied the random manipulations of military hierarchies and civic privilege alike, never did so with impunity.

Arthur is a doctor whose education was made possible by the earnings of the only girl in a family of seven boys, her hollowed-out eyes in all the frames, who stayed home with the girl-hating mother to teach school in Tabusintac, tithing her wages so all the clever boys could go off and away! to make good, Arthur graduating from Medicine

of rejoiced relief when Harry dunks for the long, long swims to which he is fairly beckoned: *The only time I ever see your father at peace*, she proclaims to the girls, while gesturing with one bare curved arm out to sea, *is when he's swimming in the Bay of Fundy*. Her motion sweeps to starboard the morphings of war, onerous marriage vows, and the mysteries of temperament, romance, and chance. She makes things righteous so that each one of them is kindled into magnanimity that turns out to be enduring in her daughters' lives.

Each time they go to the beach in the grandfather's car, his grown-up daughter Rosa, recites the mantra of rejoiced relief when Harry dunks for the long swims to which he is fairly beckoned: *The only time I ever see your father at peace*, she proclaims to the girls, while gesturing with one bare curved arm out to sea, *is when he's swimming in the Bay of Fundy*.

at McGill University in 1900, mere son of a wood hewer from the Miramichi (meaning, *Mi'kmaq Land*) where Scots and Irish settlers, and Acadians before expulsion and afterward when some intransigently returned, turned forest into timber, land to pasture and the planted field, and wives to prolific producers of labour: the women who made it through multiple childbirths and the strenuous homesteading had to be stalwart. If not, they were relegated. You could also be plucked to leisure and have a maid do all but the childbirth, but only if you were the daughter, or niece, or sometimes the sister, of a certain class of man.

There is no counterpart in this snapshot to suggest the grandfather's wife Iva, not even off-frame, the trained soprano from Boston who by now was so soundly dead that she was never invoked by the husband who had doted on her rich soprano solos in Saint John churches when she was a canary with four children singing for her lost operatic life in the industrial port; who did, herself, succumb; who could not be saved by her husband the doctor. Later, when the men had become dead enough themselves, her story would make something of a comeback.

Swimming back and forth parallel to the shore of this Bay where a hundred billion tons of water pour in and then out twice each lunar day from the Atlantic, Harry is not just off-frame, but out of reach and visible, a most beneficial condition for them all. The baby keeps him well within her ambit, though, kenning already that he could be occupied in some sleight-of-body, some species transformation. Each time they go to the beach in the grandfather's car, his grown-up daughter Rosa, whose stenographic work for the wartime navy was so secret she never spoke of it then or after, recites the mantra

Likely, Rosa took the picture for the amusement of the three adults, in their various permutations. The attachment of Violet to Dee-Dee with her bottomless patience and tolerance, and the baby's bright doggedness: these things the adults will comment on to one another when the print is developed, with wave-like nuances of facial expression—the arched eyebrow, or wonder-eyed laugh-line-etching that takes the place of word cairns. Rosa's smile will sweeten like her father's at the way things have of turning out, because you don't have any idea how the children will be in themselves, let alone with each other.

But for the girls themselves, their simian closeness served as a closure of ranks against the three-member crew who held sway over them and were aligned along the torsion of their triangle, and by the father's kitbag of creatures dragged back from the war that he did not share with his father-in-law one iota. *The way the girls took to one another*, Rosa would say as the girls intertwined on all fours like elephants on safari, heads draped with crocheted dollies' blankets, forging a trail into the underworld below tables and chairs and chanting as faithfully as the Jesus Prayer, hour upon hour: *Wa-wa-wa-waaah!* An eighteenth-month old baby captivated by her older sister who is also her captive, with a patience of the admirable suffering kind learned in Sunday school of *Suffer little children to come unto*, who may only have wanted, strictly speaking, to foment the sand with idle stirrings, fling water from her freckled fist onto the sun-baked crenellations with a suave and expert gesture picked up from Hattie as she sprinkled an article of clothing before rolling it tight as a chignon to rest before steaming. Replete in the moment, was Deirdre, and sufficiently



Mispec Beach rocks, eastern edge. Photo: Gail Taylor

oblivious to the power of the Grand-Mummy alliance (though never of Daddy safe in the surf) that the girl baby desired to partake of her like communion and become more innocent, too.

The photo is one of rue and honour, righteousness, and adult envy; sea change.

The toddler taking a toehold in the sand to behold and beheld by a freckled big sister who notwithstanding her own contemplations turns just here and just now toward a quarter-century of commitment to her younger kin. Both of them perfect receptacles for the effusions of Mispec caused when the Bay rises and sinks the equivalent of four stories per tide—sometimes a morphing that occurs during one of their languid trips while the restless blade of Harry cuts through the high water, and low to the beach, where Rosa declares *everyone* happy. All in the era before the desecrations of Canaport and then the rise of monstrous platforms for liquefied natural gas. One snapped frag of a summer's day when the recent war was compassed to the soundly dead past by the mother (whose own mother was kept there as well), invigilated by a maze of adult agreements desperate, cynical, and wise; and only the Daddy, trained radar man and self-made magician, on active duty patrolling the shore. He would have known how staggeringly brief and direct, once Nova Scotia was out of the way, the journey between Fundy's magnitude and the

secret coves on Britain's coast where radar was deployed. The shot moment configured by the one with the camera (Rosa the mother now seems an unlikely person to have taken the picture and we cannot know either if it was the anonymous, Rosie-scarfed, shadow) yields up an amplitude like potlatch for the history of this place and time:

One girl born in wartime, the other post-war, of the cohort with a mandate to compensate for the unspeakable squandering of life in the war, spied on by the camera as all children must be, not quite in the Cold War world but within the basin of a dangerous deep sea with world-class tides that awed the adults into everlasting commentary. In a sea so cold that visitors never put more than their tootsies in, but not so glacial that the children raised there could not bob about in tidal pools when tiny, and soon enough with ample encouragement from the adults, enter the undertow and set their marine mammalian sails across its edge at high tide. This, when one tide lets in and out more water than the combined flow of all the world's freshwater rivers discharged into global oceans! Where the resonance or oscillation made you feel as if you better grow flippers or fins fast, or be rocked out of the very world, the sob and roar of the sea within. Burials in sizzling sand to blanch your shivering, and then the plunge into iced surf to stop the action of burning again; imaginary games so good the mother might even slip you a cream-topped cup of

milk from the thermos and get it *down the hatch*. The unabridged delirium of touch, skimming over sand and rock and worked over by the roiling waves, all while toddling, crawling, clambering, tumbling, and watching—always the watching and listening for wordless sibilance and for the spectral that surrounds the father, tuned to the seiche of adults tided together for their children and their lives.

Children do not know that they're being framed, you see; and I, for one, had not understood that childhood was as pervious and hulking as the rocks on which we inter-tidally survived.

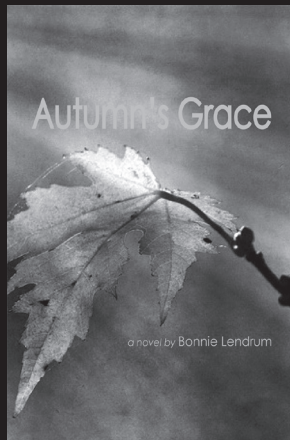
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something new
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how do they land
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